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Predecessors to Progress: A Cultural Exposition of Ancient Aztec Influence on Modern-Day

Mexico City.

Mariel Arias-Guerrero

### **Abstract**

This research explores cultural factors contributing to the state of modern-day Mexico City, specifically to expound on how Aztec economic, agricultural, and social-class structures have demonstrably influenced present-day Mexico City. An analysis of texts, letters, books, statistical records, economic and agricultural trend analyses will be among the sources accessed in order to draw informed conclusions.

## Introduction

The land where cultures meet travels back to the time periods of the Mayan, Toltec, and Aztec people. Modern-day Mexico City houses the history to these three cultures allowing it to become a historical landmark. From its beginning times Mexico City has been a place where people thrived in harsh conditions. The Aztec economy, agricultural system, and social class structure helped create the identity of modern-day Mexico City.

## Background

### Aztecs

The last civilization to arrive in the Valley of Mexico were the Aztec in 1325 AD. Following their warrior god Huitzilopochtli, they decided to settle where an eagle was devouring a snake. This decision would seem outrageous for other people, but not for the Aztecs. The location happened to be on the island of Lake Texcoco, and it is here where the Aztecs built their capital Tenochtitlan. To put the location of Tenochtitlan in perspective, it is the same place where the capital of modern-day Mexico, Mexico City, is. Tenochtitlan soon became a capital that was a modern-day Venice-like city<sup>1</sup>. The political and economic world of Tenochtitlan resembled a “Washington that was all pentagon and a London that was all Whitehall.”<sup>2</sup>

The Aztec society was advanced beyond its time. It was an empire that was full of brilliant individuals that allowed them to conquer many lands, but it also caused them to fall. When the Spaniards landed in Mexico, they were impressed by the grandeur of such a city. Eventually, however, Hernan Cortez’s team took over the city due to a legend the Emperor believed in, and it was not hard for the Spanish to take over the land and caused the fall of the Aztec empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca West, *Survivors in Mexico* (Yale University Press, 2003), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 58.

## Mexico City

Considered today the largest city of the western Hemisphere, Mexico City stands proud in its identity. It is home to 20 million individuals making it a machine of economic power. Mexico City is the “core of the nation’s economic and political life.”<sup>3</sup> The city produces more than one quarter of the nation’s economic output. Very similar to a monopoly, the wealth coming to the country is owned by private families. For example, Telmex, a telecommunications company has 95% of the communication market, Cintra owns the national airlines, Pemex controls the oil and gas industry, and Bimbo holds power in the bread and pastry industry.

Agriculture plays a huge role due to the high demand to feed the ever-growing population of Mexico City, and the world. Mexico City seems to be growing faster than the city can keep up, yet it still seems to have its historic values at the touch of its fingertips. The people must simply take a step into *La Plaza de las Tres Culturas*, where you can see the ancient civilization temples, the Spanish catholic influence, and skyscrapers and highways to the left. This plaza where the cultures meet is a visible representation of the influence the ancient Aztec civilization had and continues to have on modern-day Mexico City.



Fig 1. *La Plaza de las Tres Culturas*

<sup>3</sup> John Ross and Gregory Gransden. *Mexico in Focus 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Latin American Bureau, 2003), 14.

## Economy-Aztecs

The economy of the Aztec civilization was rooted in the environment due to its abundance of natural resources. According to Berdan the “significant micro-environmental variations, the presence of large lakes, and the availability of a wide range of essential resource made this valley a likely location for the heartland of an empire.”<sup>4</sup> Having such a wide range of resources allowed the Aztecs to become farmers, merchants, and manufacturers, and having different groups of production caused the empire to be skilled in trading. Due to the Aztec ability to trade current-day “Mexico now has free trade agreements with 29 other countries.”<sup>5</sup>

The large productions teams caused the Aztecs to have an overproduction issue. To fix this issue, the Aztecs created the concept of economic exchange. An economic exchange is “where securities, commodities, derivatives, and other financial instruments are traded.”<sup>6</sup> The Aztec economic exchange took 3 major forms: tribute and taxation, state-sponsored foreign trade, and marketplace transactions.

The Aztec empire developed a complex governmental and military structure that allowed them to conquer an empire of more than 80,000 square miles in central and southern Mexico. Having conquered such a large empire, the concept of tribute and taxations worked extremely well for the Aztecs. Tribute and taxation involved the collection of revenue from conquered regions by a military state. The revenue received was not a currency exchange, rather it was a payment of goods. Among the materials gifted to the Aztecs were “luxury and subsistence items, manufactured and raw materials.”<sup>7</sup> Depending on the region conquered, certain items had to be gifted. The farther

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<sup>4</sup> Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (New York: CBS College Publishing), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ross and Grensden, 71.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Abbott and Will Kenton, “Exchange,” *Investopedia*, Apr 10, 2019, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/exchange.asp>. (Jun 1, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 36.

away the providences were from Tenochtitlan (Aztec capital city), the more an item was considered a luxury.

With the tribute and taxation system in place, many goods were flowing in and out of Tenochtitlan. With an abundance of goods, the Aztecs implemented a system of foreign trade. Foreign trade created a new occupation of merchants who became in charge of transporting goods in and out of the city. The transportation of goods was made possible due to the trade routes the merchants created, extending from modern day Honduras to northern Mexico.<sup>8</sup> Trade routes also allowed for the discovery of new lands and empires. Due to new discoveries the Aztecs were able to take advantage of new political allies, and these exchanges “had a particular political favor, and the merchants in their travels often served as state spies in foreign lands.”<sup>9</sup>

Just like certain goods were reserved for foreign trade, others were reserved for marketplace exchange. The Marketplace served as a place where “people congregated... to buy and sell, talk, and listen.”<sup>10</sup> With so many activities provided by the marketplace, many individuals would come to take advantage. The most successful marketplace was *Tianquizli* in the center of Tenochtitlan. Here one could find utilitarian goods (corn, peppers, and pottery), luxury items (ornate clothing, tropical feathers, precious gems, and gold ornaments), and services (barbers, potters, carpenters, artisans, and prostitutes).

### **Economy-Mexico City**

Today a country’s economy is measured by its Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, which is the monetary or market value of all the finished goods and service within a specific period. GDP

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<sup>8</sup> Anastasia Kalyuta, *Rethinking the Aztec Economy* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2017), 46.

<sup>9</sup> Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 42.

“functions as a comprehensive scorecard of a country’s economic health.”<sup>11</sup> By looking at a country’s GDP one can learn if its economy is negative or positive. The country of Mexico has a positive GDP totaling 2.4 trillion in purchasing power parity or \$1.151 trillion in US dollars, making it the “11<sup>th</sup> largest in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Just like Mexico has an impressive GDP, Mexico City itself also has an impressive GDP of \$171 million US dollars, making it the number one contributor to the national GDP. “It concentrates most of the country’s economic activity, [and] generates 17% of the national wealth.”<sup>13</sup>

Considering the large amount of money Mexico City provides to the national wealth the question of how it is able to do it arises. A large portion of the national revenue comes from petroleum. “Sales from oil account for nearly a third of all government revenue.”<sup>14</sup> The oil industry in modern-day Mexico did not just appear in Mexico; it dates to the Aztec civilization. The Aztecs first discovered oil in the form of *Chapopote*, or tar in the state of Veracruz. The Aztecs used the tar as a form of incense to worship their deities, but it was not until the Spanish arrived in Mexico that it was used as a resource to create wealth. Once oil was used as a money-making machine, Mexico was able to lift its economy and enter the global oil market, accounting for “78 percent of all exports.”<sup>15</sup>

“Oil has always been Mexico’s pipeline to the global economy.”<sup>16</sup> Mexican oil entering the global market gave rise to PEMEX, an oil company with its headquarters in Mexico City. PEMEX grew so large that it began to have an income larger than Mexico’s top six industries combined.

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<sup>11</sup> Jim Chappelow. “Gross Domestic Product-GDP” *Investopedia*, Jun 27, 2019, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/gdp.asp> (Jun 25, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> *The World Factbook*, CIA, July 24, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>

<sup>13</sup> *Mexico City*, ProMexico, [www.promexico.gob.mx/template/hannovermesse/docs/states/cdmx.pdf](http://www.promexico.gob.mx/template/hannovermesse/docs/states/cdmx.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> *Frontline World*, <https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/mexico403/facts.html#04> (May 30, 2019)

<sup>15</sup> Ross and Gransden, *Mexico in Focus*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 68.



Other large corporations like PEMEX all have their headquarters in Mexico City since the corporation's owners are private families who live in Mexico City. Having corporations like PEMEX in Mexico City brings large quantities of money in and out of Mexico City, creating a financially friendly environment. "Power continues to radiate from Mexico City just as it did in pre-conquest times."<sup>17</sup>

### **Agriculture- Aztecs**

Agriculture has always been the foundation of the Aztec empire. Due to Tenochtitlan's location, agriculture was difficult. Corn became the most valuable crop of the Aztecs because of its ability to grow in low and high elevated places. In the "Valley of Mexico, only one crop per year was normal."<sup>18</sup> With corn being the only crop planted, the Aztecs would come face to face with a food shortage problem. The solution to keeping the Aztec people alive was found with the creation of *Chinampas*, or floating gardens, along the shallow beds of the lake.

The city of Tenochtitlan was built on an island on Lake Texcoco. The city did not have enough land to make agriculture possible, but what it did have was water everywhere. The Aztecs were able to overcome their land shortage problem with the creation of chinampas.

"A chinampa was constructed by piling alternative layers of vegetation and mud in shallow areas of the lake. The parcel was held secure at first by post, and later, when the plot was established, by the roots of willow trees planted at the corners and along the sides.

The entire plot thus served as a deep, humus-filled foundation for

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 16.

continuous cultivation. It was bordered by canals and walkways, and irrigation was provided by digging into an adjacent canal.”<sup>19</sup>

With the chinampas in place, the Aztecs were able to grow more than one crop year around, “including maize, beans, chiles, amaranth, tomatoes, and flowers.”<sup>20</sup>

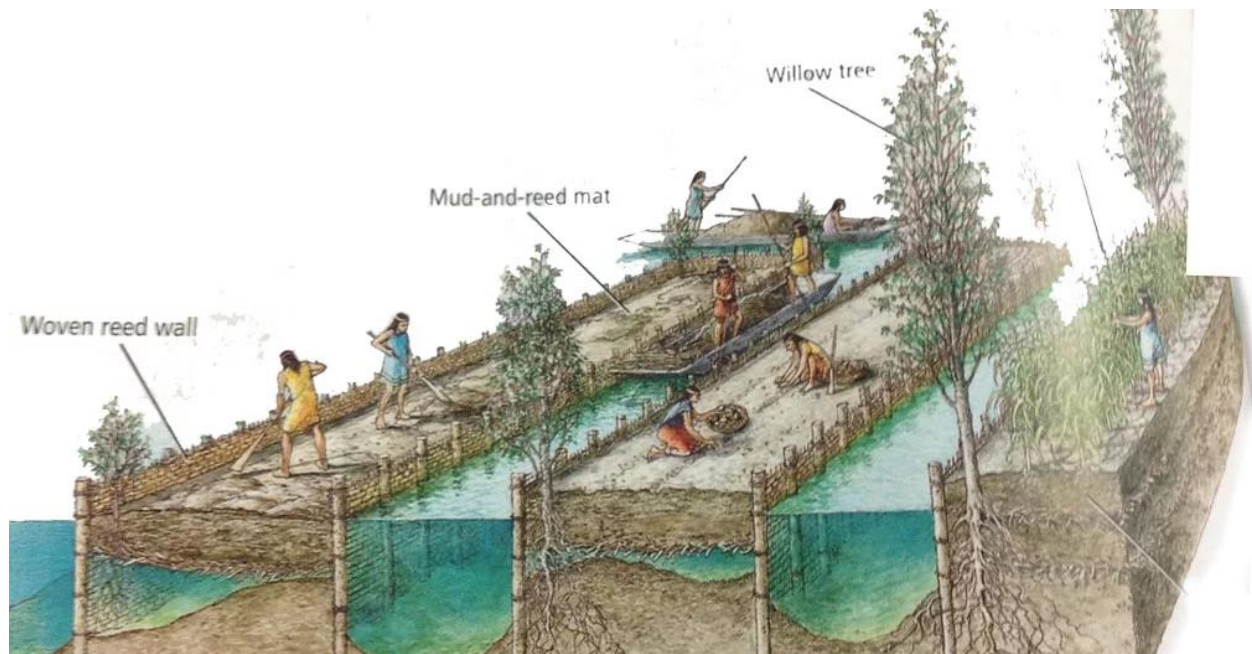


Fig. 2 Chinampa structure

## Agriculture- Mexico City

Mexico City is considered the largest city on the Western Hemisphere due to its growing population of 20 million inhabitants,<sup>21</sup> and it continues to grow every day. Like any large metropolitan area, Mexico City struggles in “crucial areas [such] as water supplies, transportation, and air quality”<sup>22</sup> as well as in means of agriculture. Due to the size of Mexico City (573 square miles), attempting to grow its food becomes tricky, and Mexico City faces the same challenges other urban cities around the world face. A framework in urban agriculture has been created to

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Ross and Grensden, *Mexico in Focus*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 15.

help these large cities farm their own food. “The policy framework thus developed clearly reflects the three dimensions of sustainability and has three broad dimensions: Social, economic, and ecological.”<sup>23</sup> The social dimension requires the government to educate its citizens in areas related to urban agriculture (food hygiene, administration/economic spending/ organic wastes.) Ecological dimension refers to seeing the city’s waste as a reusable resource. With this framework in place Mexico City plans to bring agriculture into the city.

The creation of Urban Agriculture brought three agricultural movements into the city: rooftop, vertical, and Chinampa gardening. Rooftop and vertical gardening did not appear out of thin air. This method of gardening goes back to the Mesopotamian times (4000 to 600 BC.) “The Sumerians, Babylonians and

*Fig 3. Vertical garden at intersection in Mexico City*



Assyrians included roof gardens and the planting of trees and shrubs on aboveground terraces.”<sup>24</sup> Rooftop gardens are being planted on top of commercial and residential buildings. Vertical gardening is way to grow plants on a vertical panel using hydroponics. With the implementation of vertical and rooftop gardening, cities like Mexico City will also be seeing changes in their environment.

“A typical four-story building could filter 40 tons of noxious gases per year, while also trapping and breaking down 15 kilograms of

<sup>23</sup> Hans Dieleman, “Urban Agriculture in Mexico City; balancing between ecological, economic, social, and symbolic value,” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, (2016): 5157.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 5157.

heavy metals. Acting as a natural muffler, it could reduce nearby noise pollution by 10 decibels.”<sup>25</sup>

The Chinampa technique mentioned earlier was created by the Aztec Civilization in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC. Chinampas or “floating gardens” were used to make agriculture irrigation possible. Today in Mexico City there is a section of the city known as Xochimilco where Chinampas are still being used to farm. With these 3 methods of Urban agriculture “produces high-valued products...such as vegetables, aromatic and medicinal herbs and fruit crops.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Social Class Structure- Aztecs**

The social organization put in place by the Aztecs was based on four p’s: “power, privilege, prestige, and property.”<sup>27</sup> Even with such requirements in place, the Aztecs had room for upward mobility through achievement. The population was divided in three major groups: nobility, intermediate positions, and commoners.

The nobility was divided into three different subdivisions: the tlatoque (rulers), the teteuctin (chiefs), and the pipiltin (sons of nobles). For any individual to be considered part of the nobility certain guidelines had to be met. They had to have lineage ties “to the first Mexica ruler, Acamapichtli”<sup>28</sup>, or through religious doctrine and legal codes.

The tlatoque were “supreme rulers of major political bodies (empires, cities, towns).”<sup>29</sup> The tlatoque in Aztec society was known as the emperor. Before he could become emperor, the chosen individual had to be “elected from the members of one dynasty by an electoral college of a hundred eminent persons.”<sup>30</sup> Once elected as emperor he had all the privileges that came with the title. His

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<sup>25</sup> “The Vertical Gardens of Mexico City,” *Toronto Star (Canada)*.

<sup>26</sup> Dieleman, “Urban agriculture,” 5157.

<sup>27</sup> Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>30</sup> West, *Survivors in Mexico*, 58.

nobles also enjoyed from the privileges that the emperor enjoyed. The tetcutin were individuals who “controlled a more restricted area than the tlatoque; usually occupied high military and government positions.”<sup>31</sup> The pipiltin were the sons of the tetcutin who “occupied governmental, religious, and military positions.”<sup>32</sup>

The intermediate positions of the Aztec society only had subdivisions: the pochteca (merchants) and the tolteca (artisans). The merchants were responsible for “trading over long distances; often agents of the state.”<sup>33</sup> Their trade routes included from the “valley of Mexico all over the isthmus to the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.”<sup>34</sup> Trading with other places allowed for the Aztec economy to grow and flourish. It was thanks to the merchants that such an economic boom was taking place, yet society rejected the merchant class, for they “were without moral authority in Aztec society.”<sup>35</sup> Below the pochteca were the tolteca, a group of “artisans of crafts such as gold- and feather working.”<sup>36</sup> This group of people were pushed away from society to live in isolation. This happened due to their name, “called by that name because the crafts they practiced were supposed to have been invented by the Toltec.”<sup>37</sup>

The largest social group in the Aztec society were the commoners. The commoners had three subdivisions: macehualtin (free commoners), mayeque (rural tenants), and tlacotin (slaves). The free commoners were “agriculturalist, fishers, and producers of utilitarian crafts.”<sup>38</sup> This group was the bulk of the Aztec population, and they provided the majority of military personnel. The mayeque were individuals “who worked on the private land of the nobility”<sup>39</sup> sort of like a rural

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<sup>31</sup> Berden, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>34</sup> West, *Survivors in Mexico*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Berden, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 46.

<sup>37</sup> West, *Survivors in Mexico*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Berden, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, 46.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 46.

tenant. They were also not obligated to pay tribute to the supreme master, unless he owned the land where they lived. At the bottom of the chain were the slaves. Their primary job was to provide “urban labor for the nobility, and attained their status through gambling, economic necessity, or a criminal act.”<sup>40</sup> Compared to other slaves throughout history, the slaves of this time period had the ability to buy back their freedom with work or money. It was not a hopeless position to be in since they also had the ability to rise in social rank like any other member of society.

### **Social Class Structure-Mexico City**

The division of people has been in place since the beginning of Mexico. With its 20 million inhabitants, Mexico City is the place where the class division can be seen strongly. The social class structure of Mexico City is composed of three major classes: Upper, middle, and lower classes, as well as their subdivisions.

The Upper class is made up of two very small groups: The aristocrats, and the plutocrats. At the very top of the ladder you have the aristocrats, a small group of about 200 families, who “have a very clear sense of themselves and their position in society.”<sup>41</sup> Such a strong sense of belonging comes from their ties to the founding ancestors of Mexico. To be considered having ties, four different ties had to be met. The first one was to be a descendent of the Spanish conquistadors. The second, third and fourth were when the descendants of the plutocrats who achieved aristocratic rank by the end of the first, second, and third renewal. The capital being a place of such importance caused the migration of many aristocrats to the city, which “has been closely associated with Mexico City.”<sup>42</sup> While the aristocrats have planted their roots in Mexico City they are no longer at the top of the social chain. “Today’s aristocrats acknowledge the reality

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Hugo G. Nutini and Barry L. Isaac, *Social Stratification in Central Mexico, 1500-2000* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 98.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 100.

of their class's loss of power and wealth."<sup>43</sup> With their power and wealth gone, the aristocrats only have a last name keeping them afloat.

The ruling class of Mexico today is the plutocracy. Plutocrats made their money from industry, commerce, and finance. This class is responsible for the present economic foundations of Mexico, because they are "a new breed of businessmen-entrepreneurs-engaged in all aspects of modern banking, industry, manufacturing, and trade."<sup>44</sup> This class has four subdivision groups. The first group, about a third, comes from the rags to riches story. The second group are individuals coming from a solid middle-class background. Typically, this group tends to be educated in law, engineering, or finance. They are also the largest group in the plutocracy, and the "members are the backbone of the plutocracy as a ruling class."<sup>45</sup> The third group are individuals coming from an upper middle-class background, and they have the best original class position due to "having had the longest relationship to the aristocracy and are the leaders of the superordinate stratum."<sup>46</sup> The fourth group are foreign born plutocrats, the majority French or Italian. Two thirds of the plutocrats of Mexico are based in Mexico City. Having chosen Mexico City as their home adds value to the economic and political life of Mexico City.

The middle class of Mexico is composed of three major classes: Upper, solid, and lower middle. Compared to the United States or western Europe, the middle class of Mexico is rather small. The upper middle class is the most difficult to place compared to other middle classes. The upper middle class of Mexico is closely related to the plutocracy in Mexico City, and "serves as the social support group for the resident plutocracy."<sup>47</sup> Because this class is a support system, it is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 125.

unable to control specific sectors of political, social and economic life. The solid middle class is the smallest social class, less than 15 percent of the population.

“It comprises professionals (physicians, lawyers, engineers, architects, dentist, accountants, and agronomist), owners of medium-sized businesses (retail stores, specialty shops, laboratories, small clinics, local construction firms, and service provider), medium-sized farmers, middle-level bank officials, and government bureaucrats (local, state, and federal).”<sup>48</sup>

The lower-middle class is composed of 20-25 percent of Mexico’s population. This class is identified as either white-collar or blue-collar workers. The white-collar worker is preferred above the blue color worker due to the view that “those who do manual labor automatically rank lower than those who do not.”<sup>49</sup> The lower class of Mexico is composed of two large groups of people: the working class, and the marginal class. The marginal has members who “hold steady jobs in the formal economy.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand the marginal class is composed of members whose “employment is sporadic and often in the informal (unlicensed, untaxed) economy.”<sup>51</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The city of Tenochtitlan and Mexico City have a connection that dates back all the way to 1325 AD. Both cities became staple centers of their lands. In their economy, both places knew the concept of trade very well. To keep up with the over growing population, they had to develop way to feed their people. Social class developed in both cities. As you can see Mexico City is strongly

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 143.



influenced by the Aztec civilization, and it is due to this influence that Mexico City is shaped the way it is today.

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